

20 BLACK WOMEN

A Profile of Contemporary
Black Maryland Women

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ENOLIA PETTIGEN McMILLAN

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Located on North Avenue* in the heart of the inner city is the Baltimore office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The interior of the office consists of five rooms, the largest of which serves as a reception area whose walls are covered with citations, awards and pictures chronicling the history of the organization. A small corridor filled with well-worn but still functional office equipment leads into a front room--the president's office, Enolia Pettigen McMillan, a woman as practical and unpretentious as the office she occupies.

A veteran of many campaigns in the struggle for social justice and human equality for all people, Enolia McMillan is an educator, community activist, wife and mother. A pioneer in the fight for educational equality in the state, she was the first black to serve as trustee to the executive committee of the Public School Teacher's Association and a member of the Governor's Commission on the Structure and Governance of Education in Maryland. Also, she was the first and only woman elected president of the Maryland State Colored Teachers' Association (later called the Maryland Education Association).

Mrs. McMillan has received numerous citations and awards, such as the NAACP Merit Medal, the National Sojourner Truth Service Award of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Distinguished Citizen Award from the Democratic Ladies Guild, Community Service Award from Iota Chapter of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority, Outstanding Woman in Community Development Award from Baltimore Alumni Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and many, many others. Not always the recipient of laurels, Mrs. McMillan has also received her share of thorns.

*At the time of this writing the office was at this location; however, it has since moved.

Branded a Rebel

In the mid 1930's, because she dared to speak out against institutional racism in the public educational system, she was branded a rebel. "When I started teaching in Baltimore at Booker T. Washington Junior High, that school like most schools assigned to blacks, was poorly equipped. We only had secondhand books, no library and no auditorium."

As a teacher, Mrs. McMillan strongly objected to the disproportionate allocation of funds among the schools. Although blacks were taxed the same as whites, black schools were provided only meager funds to educate their young, while white schools were well staffed and equipped. As if denying blacks adequate learning facilities were not sufficient evidence of the lack of concern and commitment to providing quality education, even the salaries of black teachers were kept significantly lower than that of whites, Mrs. McMillan explains. These inequities she eventually documented in her graduate thesis, and this was the basis upon which some school officials concluded that she was a troublemaker.

Willow Grove, a small hamlet in Pennsylvania, was the place of Enolia Pettigen McMillan's birth. However, when she was three her family moved to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. It was in Cecil County, Maryland that her father, Mr. Pettigen, purchased a small farm, which the family, his wife and four children, worked sufficiently to squeeze out a modest living. Being the oldest child, the young Enolia was expected to carry more household responsibilities than the younger children. She accepted these responsibilities willingly, realizing that in order to survive the whole family had to work together. Even today, she continues to approach each new task with the same spirit of cooperation characterized by her youth.

Poverty, the Main Obstacle

Of her life during those early days on the farm, she explains, "We were poor; in fact I would say that poverty was the main obstacle in my life at that time." Although poor, her family was fiercely independent. "We didn't borrow, beg or steal. If we didn't have, we did without. I knew that my family was poor, so I made no unreasonable demands on them. Likewise, even after I became a teacher, my income was modest, but I learned early in life to 'make do,' so not being a person of wealth didn't bother me."

Although the Pettigen's were poor, they were rich in aspirations for their children. Instilled with the conviction that it was possible to succeed at any task if one worked hard and persevered, the children found in the daily accomplishments of their father the realization of this belief. "My dad only went to school about six weeks in his entire life, yet he was able to figure out things in his head quickly, while we children were struggling to figure out the answer using paper and pencil."

Calculating the answer to some mathematical problem was a small feat compared to some of the other accomplishments of Mr. Pettigen. "Being a farmer by vocation (in fact, my dad used to be a farmer at Morgan way back when it was a preparatory school), he knew nothing about architecture. He was first and foremost a farmer, but necessity demanded that he provide a home for his family and that he did." Although he was not trained in the building crafts, he built his own house, did the carpentry and installed the plumbing and heating as well.

"Back in those days, plumbing was a rare skill, which few blacks had, but my dad measured and figured until he successfully completed the job," his daughter recalls. As much influence as her father had on her life, her mother was equally influential. "My mother helped me discover the full range of my potential by trusting me to share important family responsibilities early. It was she who instilled in me a sense of confidence, which to this day has been a valuable asset."

An unassuming, modest, practical approach to life is still the essence of Mrs. McMillan's nature. She still takes pride in making her own clothes and enjoyment in growing things. Sometimes chided by her husband for attempting to grow tomatoes in the clay soil of her backyard, Mrs. McMillan continues her efforts, as she believes her persistence will reap a decent harvest someday. This attitude of persistence was a quality fostered in her in early childhood.

Questioned the Inequities of Maryland Public Education

Enolia McMillan's primary education was received in the segregated public schools of Maryland. Recognized as a bright, resourceful student by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (Epsilon Omega Chapter), she was the recipient in 1922 of the sorority's first scholarship, which helped finance her undergraduate training at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Upon being graduated from Howard in 1926, she immediately began her teaching career by accepting a position

as a high school teacher in Denton, Maryland. As the years passed she became interested in advanced training, but found most local graduate schools closed to blacks, a situation which persisted as late as the 1940's.

Therefore, she, like many other blacks, commuted to Columbia University. While studying at Columbia, she began seriously questioning the inequities of the Maryland public education system. Sparked by the spirit of intellectual inquiry and fortified with new knowledge about the economic and political forces that shape public education, she decided that this issue would be the foundation of her master's thesis. This single decision was to have far-reaching consequences; in fact, it marked the turning point in her life. Upon graduation from Columbia, she continued to teach in Maryland, and strong opposition began to mount against her within the administration, she confides.

Never fearing the heat of controversy or needing the comfort of group approval, Mrs. McMillan held to her convictions. She knew as well as some of her less courageous colleagues that the educational system maintained segregated practices which undermined the rights of blacks to quality public education. Although the accuracy of her study was never questioned, nor was its scholarly merit, some educational administrators could not tolerate having a report published which documented the inequities of the system.

Consequently, Mrs. McMillan paid dearly for publicizing these conditions, and her professional career suffered greatly. "Although I spent a number of years in the system and had the necessary educational credentials, I was never given the promotions I deserved. I was never made a principal in Baltimore, despite seven years experience as principal of Pomonkey High School in Charles County, Maryland."

In 1968, Mrs. McMillan retired from the Baltimore City Public Schools, but her retirement from professional life was brief. The following year she assumed the presidency of the Baltimore Chapter of the NAACP, a post which she has held for seven terms.

Led the Maryland Fight to Save the NAACP

When Mrs. McMillan was born in 1904, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had not yet been founded. It was not until five years later, in 1909, that the organization was established. An outgrowth of the Niagara Movement, an abortive attempt to organize blacks

to combat the increasing practices of overt racism, the NAACP was a coalition of blacks and liberal whites. Like the Niagara Movement, the NAACP was organized in response to the mounting tide of legalized racism, which had swept the country after the 1883 Supreme Court decision outlawing the Civil Rights Act of 1875.

From its inception through the mid 1950's, the Association was the primary voice and chief proponent of human equality for blacks. It launched many successful legal battles and checked constantly for dangers that might threaten to disenfranchise black Americans. The Baltimore Chapter became the second branch of the Association to be established in the country and has played a critical role in the growth of the organization.

The mid 1950's ushered in a variety of civil rights organizations, which, in the opinion of younger blacks, were more militant than the NAACP. "This view of the Association resulted in a decline in membership, but, most importantly, a more recent financial crisis threatened the continued existence of the Association," explains Mrs. McMillan. "In the summer of 1976, the National Office was hit by a \$1.2 million lawsuit levied against it in connection with a 1966 boycott in Gibson, Mississippi."

Considered as much a judicial outrage as the Dred Scott decision or the Scottsboro boys case, the decision, reached by a Mississippi judge, has the potential of bringing legal destruction to the NAACP. The judge ruled that twelve white merchants were damaged to the tune of \$1,250,559 by and NAACP boycott from 1966-70. Furthermore, the NAACP and other blacks "wrongfully combined and colluded a civil conspiracy and illegally created a monopoly" for black businesses. "This judgement," explains Mrs. McMillan, "necessitated the NAACP's posting a bond of \$1,562,000." Failure to meet the bond requirement would result in the immediate execution of the judgement, which threatened to bankrupt the organization.

Throughout the country the call for contributions went out, and people who believed in the work of the Association were asked to support it now in its time of need. In Maryland, Mrs. McMillan led the fight. Speaking to individuals and groups in their homes, churches, and organizations' headquarters, she went out and told the story of the NAACP. The lessons of patience, perserverance and endurance learned in her earlier life served her well during the critical period. In the many appearances she made throughout the



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state seeking contributions for the Association, she reminded blacks and other supporters of the extraordinary accomplishments of the NAACP.

"Some perceive the NAACP to be conservative because it works primarily through established channels, and this perception may have caused loss of prestige among some blacks. However, it is important to understand that the NAACP has consistently won important legal victories which were critical to the survival of black people." As a result of its most recent efforts, the NAACP was able to muster sufficient financial support to ward off bankruptcy.

However, Mrs. McMillan recognizes that the problem still remains. The Mississippi decision might set a precedent for other lawsuits against the Association. But, regardless of what dangers might threaten the Association in the future, one of its greatest assets is its Baltimore President, Enolia Pettigen McMillan.